

DECOLONIZATION, PARTITION AND ITS COROLLARY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: A STUDY OF *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN* BY KHUSHWANT SINGH

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ABSTRACT

History and literature are symbiotic to each other as history contributes to the enrichment of literature and literature contributes by refurbishing perverted historical facts. The partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 was such a traumatic experience in the recent history that brought avertable agony, humiliation, forfeiture of human dignity and a defeating sense of being uprooted to the millions of people. This was not what the people had yearned for in the name of freedom-they were feeling defeated and cheated by this chicanery. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is a convincing accord of ill-fated nations that underwent this agony and still struggling to quell this politically sponsored hatred. The objective of this endeavor is to retrieve the history, tracing the course of deterioration of social relations, degeneration of communal harmony and disintegration of nations. This awareness is pre-requisite to consolidate our position for the efficient promotion of good for the posterity.

KEYWORDS: Colonization, Corollary, Communal, Partition and Freedom

INTRODUCTION

What difference does it make to the dead, the
orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction
is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy
name of liberty and democracy?
Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Non-Violence in Peace and War, Vol. I, Ch. 142.
(qtd. in Lucas)

On February 19, 2007, a devastating bomb explosion in Samjhauta Express, a bi-weekly train running between Delhi and Lahore left sixty eight people dead and hundreds wounded. This oldest train link between India and Pakistan is equally used by the members of Pakistani and Hindu families divided by a national border drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe. The paradox lies in the fact that this abominable attack was transpired on the eve of initiation of a peace discourse between India and Pakistan, and almost five years after the Godhra train carnage which left thousands of Hindus and Muslims killed. Is it just a coincidence that a train is becoming the rostrum for all communal frenzy? Infact, the train is the proscenium unremittingly gulping and swallowing people and their faith in humanity.

Its preamble was inscribed precariously on the psyche of both nations at the time of partition in a similar train going to Pakistan amidst a bloodbath and returning overladen with reeking cadavers. This is a wide acknowledged truth that the partition of Indian subcontinent was the single most distressing experience in our recent history after the Holocaust. Before the public could have the percipience of the imponderable political and social implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by a wave of violence that rapidly took the configuration of a Tsunami. On either side of the border, thousands of people were massacred, women raped and slayed defeating the humanity. For millions of people, freedom at midnight brought appalling but avertable agony and humiliation, a forfeiture of human dignity and a defeating sense of being uprooted. This was not what they had yearned for in the name of freedom – the partition became a skullduggery.

Though the dominance of British imperialism came to an end but it prompted the inevitable partition of Indian subcontinent, which ushered into two sovereign states, ending a long standing communally shared history and cultural heritage. But the western hegemony flourished through knowledge. Setting a new tradition, the writers portrayed cultural, political and intellectual hybridity in a fragile amalgamation of history and language. “History can only be a narrative construction involving a dialectical relationship of past and present concerns” (Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh 252). On Feb. 02, 2014, in his keynote address in the National Seminar on the topic “The Historical Novel from Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh: An Overview”, Bhim S. Dahiya argues:

Historical or otherwise, literary narratives are, of course, to be judged by their power to evoke real life and their moral perspective that evaluates the human actors as well as historical events in terms of right and wrong. That is where literature, more so the novel, shows its proximity to philosophy. Thus, even the historical novel, to be a literary narrative of high order, has to have the philosophic component. (02)

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), B. Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer* (1958), Malgonkar’s *The Distant Dream* (1960), Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* (1975) and Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) are the recreations of the events and situations reflecting partition and its aftermath in Indian English idiom. Hayden White writes in his essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” that “so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report on the way things really happened...” (Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh 265) and more so in case of a sensitive issue like freedom of one nation and creation of two.

History and literature are symbiotic to each other as history bestows to the enrichment of literature and literature in its turn contributes by refurbishing perverted historical facts. The partition witnessed the best amongst Hindus – teachers, doctors, philanthropists – leaving Pakistan and making India their new abode. The Muslims also moved to Pakistan in hopes of a better future. Though, those who migrated from both the communities have remained trapped in nostalgia. Writers, poets, artistes found their future devastated by partition. Saadat Hasan Manto, Noorjahan, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, H.S. Suhrawardy, Bhutto, Yakub Khan trooped off to Pakistan while Kuldip Nayyar, Inder Kumar Gujral,

Khushwant Singh resettled in an India that has drifted from earlier ways that they had cherished. In the introduction to his essay on “The Discreet Charms of Indian Terrorism”, AshisNandy argues:

“....the formation of the nation-state of India, has been a much contested process.

Establishment of the country on the structures created by colonial powers had led to a complex set of relationship between the state and the people, or the citizens”(153).

It was summer of 1947 when ten million people the Muslims, the Hindus and the Sikhs were fighting, mauling, molesting and killing punitively. By the time the monsoon broke, nearly a million of them were killed. During such tumultuous times when most of the northern India and newly formed Pakistan villages were reeling under the burden of communalism, Khushwant Singh depicts Mano Majra as gleaming and gusty, cheerful and gratified oasis of tranquility. In their beatific ignorance of eerie riots the Muslims and the Sikhs of this village still believed in Gandhian ideology though Gandhi himself was then “walking the bloody paths of the riot-torn India of his dream, lonely and disillusioned” (Singh 126).

Nevertheless, Mano Majra became the microcosm of communal amity, where Sikhs and Muslims, equally distributed in the village live in peace. Only one Hindu family of Lala Ram Lal lived in this village. Astoundingly, all the villagers worshipped the local deity, Deo, that was a three-foot Sandstone slab and “all the villagers-Hindu, Sikh and Muslim or pseudo-Christian- repair secretly whenever they are in special need of blessing” (Singh 29). The religious heads of the Muslims and the Sikhs, Imam Baksh and Meet Singh, respectively waited for each other ‘to make the first call’ to Almighty. The Muslim Mullah, Imam Baksh was endearing ‘Chacha’ to the villagers, and Meet Singh was ‘Bhai Meet Singh’ and they did not have any religion based cavils.

This candid camaraderie amid Mano Majrans became evident when Meet Singh told Iqbal: “Everyone is welcome to his religion. Here next door is a Muslim mosque. When I pray to my Guru, uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah” (36-37). K.R. SrinivasaIyengar submits: “Here’s functional integration, and indeed there are tens of thousands of villages like Mano Majra, where the law has always been peace co-existence, and not communal strife” (qtd. in Naik and Narayan 62). But, the arrival of the ghost train shattered the time-honoured harmony between the communities. Though the charged communal passions were in the propinquity yet the Sikhs of the village were placid without any ill will.

Khushwant Singh portrays in this novel deliberately that distortion and exaggeration of facts betray all reason and logic and lead to dreadful consequences. The scepticism began with the murder of Lala Ram Lal by a dacoit. This murder was interpreted and promulgated in a manner that it acquired communal connotations. Further the seeds of suspicion amongst different communities were disseminated by a devious police enquiry.

The mistrust aggravated with the disappearance of Sultana and Iqbal. The police had doubts about the Mano Majrans and the Sikhs lost faith in the Muslims. This situation “had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter” (Singh 105).The Sikh community sulked into silence fearing their neighbours’ precarious involvement against them and started snooping them to distinguish their comrades from adversaries.

Recollecting the stench of the searing flesh of corpses from the ghost train, burnt a few days ago, sent a chill down their spine. “Quite suddenly every Sikh in Mano Majra becomes a strange with an evil intent.

His long hair and beard appear barbarous, his kirpan menacingly anti-Muslim” (105). The Sikhs became aversive to the sense of fear of oppression and dominance by the Muslims. Their faith was faltering and they recalled the harangues of their Gurus ‘not to trust a Muslim’. They were shocked to acknowledge the spying of Iqbal on them and it incited them to forsake deferential attitude towards the Muslims and jolted them out of the complacent cocoon of harmony.

They had looked upon the Muslims as their own brothers and sisters and could never imagine any kind of treachery from their side. Now the seeds of suspicion were sown and they got the fertile ground of misrepresentation of history by the Britishers to get this bitter scepticism rooted and diffused in surroundings with an alacrity. “All through the Muslims period of Indian history....what had they done to Sikhs?... hundreds of thousands had been put to sword for no other offence than refusing to accept Islam; their temples had been desecrated by the slaughter of kins, the holy Granth torn to bits” (107-8). Such distorted representations replete with incidents of cruelty against the Sikhs and the Hindus including their women and children aggravated the situation further.

“The myth of Muslim rapine and destruction was thus utilized in order to stress the point that there was nothing wrong if the British rule too was autocratic and despotic. But what makes the difference was that their British rule was benevolent and just and operated under the rule of law”(V.Pala PrasadaRao, et. al. 36).

That was the colonial mind-set and their justification of ruling that “.....imperialism is a means of bringing to a subject people the blessings of a superior civilization, and liberating them from their benighted ignorance” (Habib 738). Delineating this colonial shrewdness of the masters, Khushwant Singh describes how love and humanity prevail in the moments of crisis. The story of Jugga- a self confessed goon and his love for a Muslim girl Nooran is exposition of the triumph of goodness and love in challenging times. It is the love of Nooran and Juggut Singh ‘Jugga’ that endures and transcends the ravages of partition. When released from jail, Jugga realizes that any assault on train to Pakistan must mean hazard to his beloved Nooran, so he determines to avert the ambush on the train, if fated he will sacrifice his life. The sabotage was planned using a rope ‘stiff as a shaft of steel’ tethered across the first span of the bridge to decimate the passengers on the train. He used his ‘kirpan’ to slit the rope that was tied to bring about the train catastrophe. When Jugga was cutting the rope, a volley of shots pierced his body and he collapsed, snapping the rope in the middle as he fell.

“The train went over him and went on to Pakistan” (Singh 190) with all the Muslim Refugees safe and sound and it is the ending of the novel. Thus, Jugga becomes the real man of action “when the bureaucracy, the intelligence, the man of religion and the political leadership failed to act” (V. Pala Prasada Rao, et. al. 40). Jugga’s Supreme sacrifice culminated in the safe passage of train to Pakistan saving hundreds of innocent life. Quoting Chrintan Kulshrestha: “Jugga’s act of love and sacrifice silhouetted against the backdrop of hatred and violence, towers above the communal differences and lends a meaning to the general aimlessness of life in the partition days” (qtd. in V. Pala Prasada Rao, et. al. 41).

Here Jugga’s sacrifice symbolizes harmony and integration when everything else was disintegrating and humanity was the biggest casualty. So, Khushwant Singh accords an authentic and convincing but sorrowful description of ill-fated

nations by creating such characters that transcend their actual. Kavita Daiya argues in her book on partition that “the humanistic exploration of violence-its representation, naming, remembrance and reproduction-is essential if we are to uncover the sites and strategies to challenge the discourses that initiate it and then propagate it” (30).

Thus, we recall partition in order to interrogate and interrupt the eternally increasing intolerance and violence amongst the masses and the ethnic, racial, gendered and national dispossessions of the minor subjects in the 21st century. In Khushwant Singh’s novel, partition can be viewed as inheriting a new sense of historical edifice that is taken at its own value and significance to our national history.

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